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ABSTRACT

This review identifies options for developing alternate assessments for students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the general district and state assessments used for accountability purposes. It notes that students with disabilities are often excluded from these educational assessments used for accountability and urges development of better guidelines for deciding who participates, who receives accommodation, and how the data are reported. The report defines alternate assessment; briefly describes activities of Kentucky, Maryland, and Texas; and offers a map showing the status of alternate assessment in all 50 states. Three alternate assessment issues are identified and addressed: who should take the alternate assessment, what should be assessed, and how the alternate assessment should be integrated into the accountability system. The paper offers the following recommendations: (1) define the purpose of the alternate assessment system and who qualifies to participate in it; (2) identify the common core of learning for the alternate assessment; (3) develop participation guidelines for the alternate assessment system; (4) determine how results will be aggregated; and (5) integrate results from the alternate assessment with results from the general assessment. (DB)

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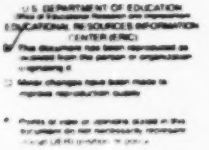
Number 5 October 1996

Alternate Assessments for Students with Disabilities



For Students Unable to Participate in General Large-Scale Assessments

Alternate assessments for students with disabilities who are unable to participate in general large-scale assessments are a new and evolving focus of educational accountability systems. Educators and policymakers have come to realize that some type of alternate assessment is needed to achieve educational accountability. Despite the limited knowledge about good alternate assessments, one thing is clear: states and districts will be expected not only to find out more about them, but also to begin using them.

Background

Accountability for student performance is a driving force behind today's district and state assessment systems. Designed to produce information that the public can understand, these assessments will help push forward educational improvement.

The public wants to know whether education is producing results as expected, and whether there are improvements in results over time. The consequences of accountability systems can be significant, both for educators and for students. In addition to being reported publicly, assessment results sometimes determine whether schools will be accredited, receive financial rewards, or be reconstituted with new staff and administrators. Students who are excluded from educational accountability systems are not considered when decisions are made about how to improve programs, and they may be denied educational opportunities that other students enjoy.

Students with disabilities need to be included in assessments used for accountability and can be included in one of three ways—**1)** participation in the general assessment without accommodations; **2)** participation in the general assessment with accommodations; or **3)** participation in an alternate assessment.

Two common ways in which students with disabilities become excluded from accountability are: **1)** by not having them take a test, even though they could, and **2)** by not reporting their assessment results. These forms of exclusion can be addressed through the development of:

- Better guidelines for deciding who participates in assessments*
- Better guidelines for determining who receives

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accommodated assessments and what accommodations may be used*

- Better policies on the aggregation and reporting of assessment results*

Adjustments in policies and guidelines will maximize the participation of most students with disabilities—those who can take the assessment in the same manner as all other students and those who need accommodations in order to take the assessment.

Changes are beginning to occur! Guidelines are being revised to include as many students with disabilities as possible in both national and state assessments. There is emerging agreement on expanding the options for accommodations during assessments. And, students with disabilities are more often being included in norming samples during test development and considered during bias reviews.

But what about those students unable to participate in the general assessment system, even when they are provided with accommodations? These students typically have more significant disabilities and they generally are not working toward a regular high school diploma. The percentage of such students is quite small, estimated to range from less than one-half of one percent to no more than two percent of the student population.

The purpose of this report is to describe options for developing an alternate assessment for students unable to participate in the general district and state assessments that are used for accountability purposes. This *Policy Directions* does not address individual accountability measures, but rather, large-scale accountability systems that create information on how the school, district, or state is doing in terms of student performance.

What is an Alternate Assessment?

The alternate assessment is an assessment designed for those students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the general large-scale assessment used for accountability purposes by a district or state. The alternate assessment provides a mechanism for students with even the most significant disabilities to be included in the accountability system.

Where have alternate assessments been implemented?

Three states have developed, or are working on developing, an alternate assessment for students unable to participate in the general state assessment. (See map on next page.) Kentucky has implemented an alternate portfolio assessment, and scores obtained on that assessment contribute to accountability indexes just as do scores on the general assessment. Maryland has developed and is field testing an alternate assessment system. Texas is developing a blueprint of what its alternate assessment will be.

The emerging nature of alternate assessments is obvious from the small numbers of states, to date, that have addressed the development of them. There is not much experience on which to build. However, enough is known to identify some of the issues that surround the development of an alternate assessment, and to make some tentative recommendations.

Alternate Assessment Issues

At this time, three issues must be resolved when developing an alternate assessment. Other issues may arise as additional states gain experience in developing alternate assessments.

1. Who is to take the alternate assessment?

Whenever an assessment system is developed for students with disabilities who cannot participate in the general assessment system, there is a potential danger that too many students with disabilities will be slated to participate in the alternate assessment system. Only a small percentage of students with disabilities should participate in an alternate assessment; most students should be in the general state or district assessment.

An alternate assessment system should be designed to assess achievement toward pre-determined standards. It should represent high standards, just as the general assessment should, and target the goals of instruction. Students who are striving toward the same goals in the same ways (with or without accommodations) as general education students

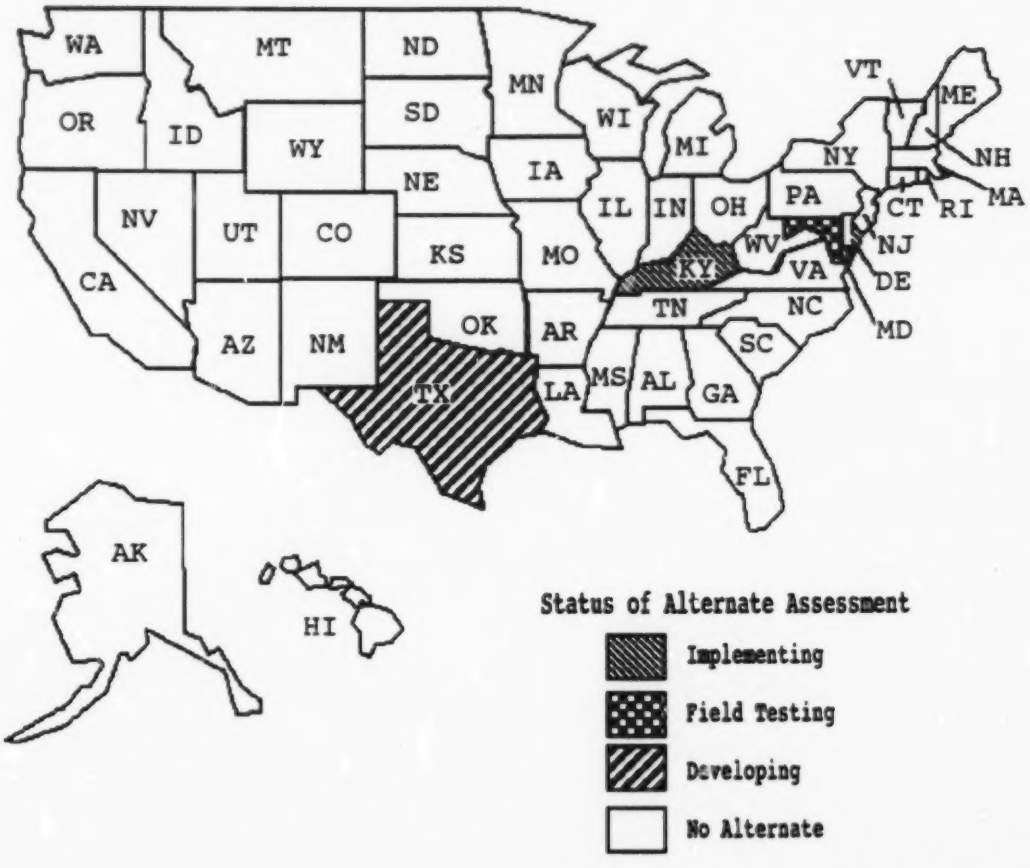
should be in the general assessment system, and their instruction and support services should be directed toward helping them achieve those standards.

Because the expectations that educators and parents hold for students with disabilities vary, it is critical that clear guidelines be established to decide who participates in the alternate assessment system. This decision should not be based on which students are expected to do poorly on the general education assessment, but on the basis of whether the student is working toward the content standards being measured by the general assessment. A policy example that could guide this decision is used by Kentucky and Maryland: the primary criterion is that the students are working on a different curriculum from most students, one that may not lead to a diploma.

2. What should be assessed? Because an alternate assessment system is designed for a small percentage of students, there is a need to identify a broader set of standards that are linked to the standards underlying the general assessment system. While there is a common core of learning toward which all stuidents are working (e.g., communication), this currently is reflected in narrowly defined ways in most general assessmrent systems.

Broadly defined goals, such as appropriate communication skills

Alternate Assessments in the United States



and independence in a number of areas (transportation, self-care, etc.), which are important for all students, need to be included in assessments of students unable to participate in general large-scale assessments.

There are problems with assuming that the alternate assessment should be completely individualized—that these students would simply be working toward the completion of their IEP goals. The primary problem with this approach is that attainment of IEP goals cannot easily be aggregated for accountability purposes and IEP goals do not serve as a total curriculum for a student.

3. How should the alternate assessment be integrated into the accountability system?
Ultimately, an alternate assessment system has little value unless the results from this system are integrated into the general accountability system. Little experience exists on which to base recommendations, but there are different perspectives on how this could be done.

One view is that the results from the alternate assessment system should be aggregated and reported separately from those of the general assessment. Another view is that the results from the alternate assessment system should be aggregated and combined with the results from the general assessment system, and then reported. One of the advantages of aggregating the results from the alternate assessment separately is that the results could be used in analyzing and improving special education services. A disadvantage of this approach is that it continues to separate students with disabilities from the majority of students, and makes it easier to be absolved of responsibility for these students. Much more study is needed for developing guidelines for appropriate reporting.

Recommendations

The recommendations presented here for developing alternate assessment systems are based on input from those states that currently have alternate assessments, as well as from educators, policymakers, and disability advocates.

▶ ***Define the purpose of the alternate assessment system and who qualifies to participate in it.***
The purpose of the alternate assessment system should be to measure the learning of those students who are working toward a broader set of standards than those assessed by the general assessment system. Typically, these students should be only those with significant cognitive disabilities who are working on educational goals more closely aligned with independent functioning.

▶ ***Identify the common core of learning for the alternate assessment.***
Most students with disabilities who participate in the alternate assessment will have IEPs that focus on broader goals than those of students with disabilities in the general assessment system. However, if a broad set of standards aren't in place, efforts to develop an alternate assessment should continue.

The types of standards adopted by states influence the extent to which students with disabilities can be integrated into one set of standards. If the standards are limited to specific goals and objectives, applying these to some students with disabilities is difficult. If the standards are broader, it is easier to encompass students with disabilities by using a subset of these standards.

A group of stakeholders that includes educators, parents, and policymakers should reach consensus on the domains of learning that are important for all students in the alternate system. This step is critical because a way must be found to aggregate students' scores on the alternate assessment for accountability purposes.

From 1992 to 1994, NCEO worked with national groups of stakeholders to achieve consensus on broad domains of learning relevant for all students (NCEO, 1995). These domains include participation, family involvement and accommodation, physical health, responsibility and independence, contribution and citizenship, academic and functional literacy, personal and social adjustment, and satisfaction. It is not recommended that the NCEO domains and outcome areas be adopted without modification (Ysseldyke & Thurlow, 1994), but they can serve as a framework to assist districts

and states in achieving consensus on the important domains of learning to assess through the alternate assessment.

▶ ***Develop participation guidelines for the alternate assessment system.***

Criteria for guiding decisions about the alternate assessment should be developed with the same careful consideration as guidelines about participation in the general assessment system. The criteria for the alternate assessment must be integrated with the criteria for making decisions about participation in the general assessment.

▶ ***Determine how results will be aggregated.***

For the alternate assessment to be useful for accountability, the scores from individual students must be aggregated. Scoring mechanisms will need to be developed to produce raw scores that are comparable from one student to the next. Or, in lieu of raw scores, scoring rubrics should be developed to describe levels of performance that can be applied to different ways of demonstrating that a standard has been met. The performance of all students who participate in the alternate assessment can thus be combined into an aggregate average score for all students in the assessment.

▶ ***Integrate results from the alternate assessment with results from the general assessment.***

Ideally, the same kinds of scores will be developed for the alternate assessment as are used for the general assessment. If this is done, and agreement is reached among stakeholders, then the scores of students in the alternate assessment can be combined with scores of students in the general assessment. Kentucky does this now in its accountability system. Maryland is developing a model of how this could be done with scores from its alternate assessment, which currently is undergoing field testing.

These recommendations address the first steps in developing an alternate assessment system for students unable to participate in the general assessment system. Adjustments to the steps will be required when a district or state already has a general assessment in place. Most likely, some rethinking of the general assessment will be required as the alternate assessment is being developed. For example, the guidelines for the general assessment probably will need to be revised in ways that will increase the participation of students with disabilities. This, in turn, will require that the purpose and methods of the general assessment system be re-examined, and possibly modified. All students with disabilities will be in the accountability system, by participating in either the general assessment or the alternate assessment.

The newest forms of assessment being used in general assessment systems (e.g., performance events, tasks, portfolios) are the likeliest candidates to comprise the alternate assessment system. However, there are other possibilities, ones that are less likely to be used as part of the general assessment system. These include teacher and/or parent checklists of student performance, videotapes of students over time, and observations of students in various situations. The range of possibilities is immense,** limited only by feasibility, time, and cost constraints.

Taking the steps toward the development of an alternate assessment system, and the construction of an accountability system that accounts for the achievement of all students, requires the involvement of many stakeholders, and the development of some shared beliefs about the responsibility of public education for all students.

Footnotes

* Each of these will be the topic of a future NCEO Policy Directions. Some guidance is already available in *Self-Study Guide for the Development of Statewide Assessments that Include Students with Disabilities* by Ysseldyke, Thurlow, and Olsen.

**NCEO is developing a resource document on the numerous assessment options (e.g., testing, record review, observation, interviews and surveys) that could be used for an alternate assessment.

Resources

Assessment Guidelines that Maximize the Participation of Students with Disabilities in Large-Scale Assessments: Characteristics and Considerations (Synthesis Report 25). Elliott, J., Thurlow, M., & Ysseldyke, J. (1996). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

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Self-Study Guide for Developing Educational Outcomes and Indicators. Ysseldyke, J., & Thurlow, M. (1994). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Self-Study Guide for the Development of Statewide Assessments that Include Students with Disabilities. Ysseldyke, J., Thurlow, M., & Olsen, K. (1996). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. ▲

About NCEO

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), established in 1990, works with state departments of education, national policy-making groups, and others on developing and assessing educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

The Center represents a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

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